

Address by the Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka at the occasion of the opening of the Fourth World Environmental Education Congress, ICC, Durban

2 July 2007

Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Rejoice Mabudafhasi
Executive Mayor of Ethekewini Metropolitan Municipality, Mr Obed Mlaba
Chairperson of the congress and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Wild and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA), Ms Mumsie Gumede
United Nation Environmental Programme representative, Mr Ibrahim Thiaw
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona representative, Professor Joan Martínez-Alier
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) representative, Dr Aline Bory-Adams
United Nation Environmental Programme representative, Dr Akpezi Obquigwe
Centre for Science and Environment India representative, Dr Sumita Dasgupta
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

While there is absolute acceptance of the reality that the human race is living beyond its means and that our present patterns of consumption and production are unsustainable, the task of encouraging people across all sectors of our communities to adopt new ways of living is an enormous task. Environmental protection should, therefore, be everyone's responsibility.

Intensifying environmental management campaigns

As we intensify our environmental management campaigns, environmental education has become a matter of common interest throughout the world as it is one of the most fundamental and important strategies to combat environmental problems. This congress comes at an opportune time when South Africa like many other countries in Africa and elsewhere seeks practical solutions to environmental challenges of the 21st century such as climate change, waste management and land degradation.

This is the first time that the World Environmental Education Congress (WEEC) comes to Africa and we are, therefore, honoured to host this conference. It should, however, be noted that Africa does not have the luxury of viewing environmental education processes as green issues.

Role of conference from an African perspective

From an African perspective, we hope that this conference will strengthen the role of education in facilitating the achievement of the objectives of the United Nations (UN) decade on education for sustainable development in African countries, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) and Southern African Developing Community (SADC) Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP).

Promoting sustainable development

The earth's population has grown from 1,5 billion at the beginning of the 20th century to about 6,5 billion and is expected to grow to 9,5 billion by 2050. Billions of these people are still trapped in abject poverty and have inadequate access to natural resources. Yet there is an ever increasing demand for natural resources so that we grow our economies, create jobs and eradicate poverty. This reality calls for a fundamental change in our approach to development; we need to promote sustainable development.

Importance of environmental education

During the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which was hosted by our country in 2002, the international community committed itself to the promotion of sustainable development principles through adherence to sound environmental management practices. Environmental education is one of the effective means through which we could enhance our abilities to meet the objectives of WSSD and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education and capacity building.

Need for strong partnerships

Given the scale and complexity of the issues confronting the international community, we need to work together to maximise our efforts and achieve our ambitious agenda that includes cutting poverty and hunger by half, ensuring that every boy and girl in the world has access to primary education and halting the spread of HIV and AIDS, all by 2015. We need to form strong and effective partnerships involving governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector, community-based organisations (CBOs) and civil society.

To achieve a greater impact on society, environmental education should focus on real outcomes to change our values and behaviour so that we all embrace the noble principles of sustainable development and respect for the environment. For environmental education to bring lasting solutions, we must have an understanding of how individuals and societies think, what they care about, what motivates them, how they communicate and the conditions under which they behave more responsibly and positively.

Constitutional obligations

Since 1994 the South African government has invested substantial resources in creating a new, democratic and integrated education and training system. New education policies and programmes have been established, guided by the Constitution. In its Bill of Rights our Constitution enshrines the right to a healthy and safe environment for all South Africans.

Young people were instrumental in South Africa in bringing about political change and apartheid united people around the world who wanted to see justice. It is that magnificent and calibre of activism that we need on the environmental front.

Environmental education has to help nations galvanise citizens. There is a tendency to make environmental education more abstract and detached from people's reality. The exclusion of poor people from participating in the environmental economy has been to all our detriment. Our country faces a busy challenge of skills, which are needed for accelerating and sharing the growth of our country. Such skills include environmental professionals whose shortage often means that Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) take too long.

South Africa has committed to green games in the 2010 Soccer World Cup, which includes:

- * energy efficiency in the stadia
- * waste management plan
- * transport with green fuels
- * greening host cities
- * water use technology.

I wish to conclude by saying that we are looking forward to groundbreaking resolutions of this conference, which will bring practical solutions to challenges in our educational systems.

I wish you a successful conference and pleasant stay in South Africa!

I thank you!

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